



TOP STORY

# 'Dear Next President'

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David Patton, Democrat-Herald

Wesy Albany juniors Illa McCaulou, left, Elizabeth Frenzel and Conner Riley, right, work on their letters to the next president.

If the nation's next president is interested in knowing what young Americans would like to see him or her accomplish, West Albany High School students have a list of suggestions.

Juniors in American Literature classes taught by Michelle Balmeo and Margie Graves are participating this year in a nationwide project, "Letters to the Next President 2.0."

Created during the 2008 presidential campaign by the National Writing Project, the online effort invites educators who work with youth ages 13 to 18 to register and sign up a site/school.

Participants publish their letters online at <https://letters2president.org>. A map shows the origin of each.

Submissions are open through Election Day, Nov. 8. As of this week, the site had received close to 3,000 letters on topics ranging from tuition to racial inequality to animal rights.

Letters from West Albany students also run the gamut. Illa McCaulou, for instance, wants the next president to reduce pollution, especially as it affects the Great Barrier Reef.

"I think America needs to follow in Australia's footsteps and put more money into preserving natural land features like the Great Barrier Reef," she said. "It's not just up to one country. It's up to the entire planet."

Classmate Eva Gamboa wrote her letter to urge the president to take action on equal pay for women.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research has published a report stating if current trends continue, women and men won't receive equal salaries until 2059, Gamboa said. She believes presidential action should shorten that term.

"I picked (the topic) because I think there's a lot of career jobs that are the same ... and it ends up that men still earn more than women," she explained.

Academically, Balmeo said, the lesson hits a number of important skills. Students are required to write "argument" papers to meet Language Arts content standards, which

include understanding the audience, taking the appropriate tone, anticipating and addressing counterclaims — and, of course, using proper spelling and grammar.

Writing to the next president is "argument, but it's argument with purpose," she said. The wider audience also appeals: "They're not just writing for me."

West students said the project's global reach is alternately empowering and terrifying.

The letters on the website don't list students' last names (although all West students interviewed or publicized for this story were all right with giving them), but even so, it can be nerve-wracking to stick your neck out, said Elizabeth Frenzel.

'It's kind of a sense of, 'Oh. Wait. What?'" said Frenzel, who chose gender roles as her issue. "You're nervous, because you want to make your point good so it can be heard."

She and her classmates in Balmeo's class agreed this was an assignment they could get behind, however.

"I feel like it's important the president hears our voice," said Jack Lamont, who urged the new president to tackle cyberbullying.

Added Courtney Rich, who advocates creating an independent watchdog group to evaluate allegations of police brutality: "You get to come up with your own ideas ... It gets out there that there's a problem."

As a teacher, Graves said the project is a great way to help students learn research skills, especially since they choose their own topics and thus are able to look up anything they might be passionate about.

"I hope they will come out of this comfortable with the research and writing process, of course, but I also hope that they will realize that their voices are powerful and that their ideas are important," she said. "Most of all, I want them to know that they should pay

attention to what's at stake in an election and understand how crucial their votes will be."

It's tough to be a high school kid, Balmeo added. Nearly every minute of every day is already preplanned, from when you get up to when you eat to what you do after school.

It's easy to get apathetic under those circumstances, she said, which makes the letter-writing project a chance for students to sound off on something they feel really matters.

"Hopefully, if a few of them feel like their voices are heard, that's a success."

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